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Vogue's Place in Twentieth Century America

Charis A. Caves

Harding University, ccaves@harding.edu

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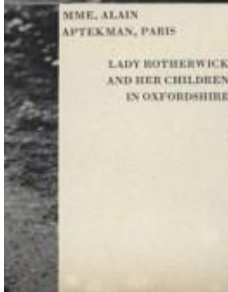
Author Bio:

Charis Caves is a Public Administration major at Harding University from Adel, Iowa. She is an anchor on Harding University's Live at Five news program. She is grateful for the opportunity to be published in Tenor of Our Times. After graduation in May 2020, Charis plans on working in the Civil Service.



AT FIUMICINO AIRPORT IN
ROME, SRA. LOREDANA PAVONE
MR. AND MRS. MEL FERRER
AT A HORSE FARM NEAR ROME

THE FASHION FOR PANTS



MME. ALAIN
APTEKMAN, PARIS

LADY BOTHERWICK
AND HER CHILDREN
IN OXFORDSHIRE



“Vogue’s Eye View: Women in Pants,” *Vogue*, July 1964.

VOGUE'S PLACE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA

By Charis A. Caves

It is ironic how the sources of mundane and common cultural consumption of an era are often the very same sources that historians study. *Vogue* magazine is one of these sources, because it cemented itself as a staple of consumerism in a rapidly shifting America. *Vogue* magazine remains a predominant part of American media after more than a century of publication. What is it about the publication, which focuses on fashion and culture, that allowed for the endurance of its popularity throughout the twentieth century? *Vogue* adapted its image to reflect the changes within American society during the twentieth century. By appealing to the “American dream” of consumerism and highlighting trendy visual aesthetics, *Vogue* became popular among a growing readership of women, causing the magazine to become a hallmark of American culture throughout an era of significant cultural change.

Vogue magazine began as a publication in Manhattan. Its content was not geared towards women or culture, rather, the articles and advertisements within spoke to a niche group of people, the Manhattan elite.¹ The first edition of *Vogue* was published in December 1892.² It contained an article entitled “Vogue Society Supplement,” which described the preparations of debutantes for the inaugural “Patriarch Ball,” followed by a list of receptions hosted by Manhattan families.³ The magazine changed significantly from its humble beginnings when its owner and its content changed.

¹ Alison Matthews David, “Vogue’s New World: American Fashionability and the Politics of Style,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 10, no. 1 (Mar/Jun 2006): 14, <https://doi.org/10.2752/136270406778051049>.

² “Vogue Society Supplement,” *Vogue*, December 1892, <https://archive.vogue.com/article/18921217051/print>.

³ *Ibid.*

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In 1909, publishing mogul Condé Nast purchased *Vogue*. “Nast’s immediate concern was for the business side of the operation.”⁴ During this time, the magazine established itself as a cultural platform.⁵ The content of the magazine shifted away from the interests of wealthy Manhattanites toward a more feminine perspective. The editorial focus became the artistic and glamorous parts of modern American life, which was reflected in *Vogue*’s growing popularity and readership.

The advent of accessible photography was one of the first significant societal changes seen within *Vogue*’s content. The use of photography within media marked a shift away from the use of hand-drawn and hand-painted art. As photography was popularized within American society, *Vogue* utilized photographs within its publication. In the early years of *Vogue*, the covers were illustrated. The cover designs were stylized, modern drawings of sophisticated women. As photography became commonplace, the design of *Vogue*’s covers shifted from the aesthetic of stylized art to photographed portraits. By the 1940s, nearly all *Vogue* covers were photographed. Outfits featured on the cover were no longer the product of an artist’s imagination. Modern photography enabled the magazine to showcase the work of fashion designers which could be purchased and worn by readers.⁶ This change also created a modern notion of style standards through the promotion of specific aesthetic.⁷

⁴ Carolyn Garret Cline, “Condé Nast,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Magazine Journalists, 1900-1960*, ed. Sam G. Riley, 249. Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1990.

⁵ Dominic Janes, “Early Twentieth-Century Vogue, George Wolfe Plank and The Freaks of Mayfair,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 18, no. 1 (March 2017): 68-69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2017.1317017>.

⁶ Norberto Angeletti and Olivia Alberto, *In Vogue: the Illustrated History of the World’s Most Famous Fashion Magazine*, New York: Rizzoli, 2006, 55.

⁷ *Ibid*, 119.

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Along with the technological development of photography, the medical field was growing. Developments in the realm of Public Health also influenced the content of the magazine. As the negative health effects of smoking were recognized, *Vogue* played a role in discouraging smoking among its readership, which resulted in the anger of some of its advertisers. During the 1900s, there was a cultural image of glamour associated with “the image of a cigarette in the hand of an elegant woman.”⁸ This can be seen in numerous editorials and advertisements in the magazine, dating back to its illustrated editions. This image was met with cultural dissonance when the dangers of smoking were recognized. Articles were published within *Vogue* to warn its readers of the dangers of smoking. Editor Grace Mirabella started an anti-smoking campaign in the magazine, featuring unappealing images of cigarette butts taken by photographer Irving Penn. This “caused clashes with *Vogue's* advertisers” who used the cultural imagery of glamorous smoking in their ads.⁹ This also created a dissonance through the promotion of competing ideals, which harkens back to the dissonance regarding *Vogue's* interpretation of women's roles.¹⁰ Perhaps these messages cancelled each other out, or perhaps they appealed concurrently to the diverse beliefs held by the readership. This speaks, on one level, to the broad appeal of the publication.

Mary Stockrocki argued that *Vogue* was a “predominantly myth-making and image-making machine.”¹¹ There was a real implication to the messages that these images sold. She showed women of multiple

⁸ Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Penny Tinkler, “In *Vogue*: North American and British Representations of Women Smokers in *Vogue*, 1920s-1960s.” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 24, no 1 (2007): 10, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cbmh.24.1.9>.

⁹ Diana Vreeland, *Diana Vreeland memos: The Vogue Years* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Incorporated, 2013), 242.

¹⁰ Warsh, “In *Vogue*,” 10.

¹¹ Mary Stockrocki, “An Intergenerational Examination of *Vogue* Fashion Advertisements,” *International Journal of Education through Art* 1, no. 3 (2005): 265. <https://doi.org/10.1286/etar.1.3.259/7>.

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generations images from *Vogue* and its advertisers to study their responses. The fact that women of all three generations had an overall positive view of the material speaks to the appeal of the magazine. This study emphasized the popularity of *Vogue* through its appeal to advertisers, which often rely on creating advertisements that reflect the imagery and sophistication of the publication itself. Therefore, the advertisements played a significant role within the creation of the imagery that is *Vogue*.

The success of the publication proved that it had a larger readership than the assumed wealthy and well-to-do women¹² Throughout the early stages of its publication, *Vogue* gained a broader readership with its “greater acceptance of mass-produced and branded goods, an attitude which [typified] American fashion design.”¹³ Despite its sophisticated image, *Vogue* associated itself with everyday America because it created an aesthetic that highlighted expensive fashions within the recognizable context of everyday American life. It appealed to an image of glamour that Americans could theoretically attain. According to Mary Stockrocki, “magazines such as *Vogue* make money selling images- the magazine, not actual clothing or products.”¹⁴ In this way, *Vogue* became part of the American Dream, one that spoke specifically to women, and adapted to the changing expectations of our culture.

The February 1940 issue of *Vogue* epitomized *Vogue*'s vision of the American Dream. It was entitled the “Americana Issue” and featured a model wearing white jacket accessorized with red, white, and blue jewels.¹⁵ A feature within, entitled “Designers in America,” featured the designers of Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman, among others.¹⁶

¹² Warsh, “In Vogue,” 11.

¹³ David, “Vogue’s New World,” 14.

¹⁴ Stockrocki, “An Intergenerational Examination of Vogue Fashion Advertisements,” 265.

¹⁵ “Americana Issue,” *Vogue*, February 1940.

¹⁶ “Designers in America,” *Vogue*, February 1940,
<https://archive.vogue.com/article/19400201141/print> .

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Vogue achieved its readership by appealing to the stylistic tastes of American women, even those that did not buy the fashions within its pages.

Vogue created a cultural image: what *Vogue* published reflected the cultural desires and images of the real world. According to historian Dominic Janes, “fashion magazines played a prominent role in shaping perceptions about not merely desirable styles of dress, but of lifestyles in general.”¹⁷ For example, when women first started wearing pants, *Vogue* emphasized that “pants could be just as feminine as skirts and dresses... women just needed to pay attention to other aspects of their appearance in order to emphasize their femininity.”¹⁸ The July 1964 edition of *Vogue* contained an article entitled “Women in Pants,” accompanied with a photo of “Queen Sirikit of Thailand... in blue jeans.”¹⁹ Through editorials such as this, *Vogue* had an influence on normalizing new fashions, and thereby influenced the culture. Women wearing pants as a fashion is a purely aesthetic choice. However, fashion standards of women changed in accordance with the social power that women had within America. The editorial on women wearing pants explained that pants “will come to the city as surely as the automobile came. They will be powered by the young, the daring... women who see... the essence of contemporary allure and comfort.”²⁰ *Vogue* was not only a successful female-oriented publication, by also one that influenced the aesthetic choices of women within a shifting political environment.

Early editions of *Vogue* did not present a clear position regarding women's roles. *Vogue* advocated and supported multiple

¹⁷ Janes, “Early Twentieth-Century *Vogue*,” 68.

¹⁸ Betty Luther Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s And 1970s*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015, 20.

¹⁹ “*Vogue's* Eye View: Women in Pants,” *Vogue*, July 1964, <https://archive.vogue.com/article/19640701062/print>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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iterations of modern women and their lifestyles. However, the written articles within the magazine were not necessarily political in nature. Modern, athletic women were lauded alongside traditional, delicate models of femininity.²¹ This speaks to the notion that publications like *Vogue* have remained in the cultural marketplace due to their choice to appeal to multiple perspectives. While this is a valid argument, early editions of *Vogue* refrained from making overt political statements. By choosing to feature modern women in its pages, *Vogue* showed its support of women in society while remaining a publication focused on fashion and aesthetic. During the mid-twentieth century, this changed as *Vogue* became a platform for political figures. Two of these women were Millicent Fenwick and Gloria Steinem. Both Fenwick and Steinem were political activists, *Vogue* models, and *Vogue* writers.

Millicent Fenwick was an editor of *Vogue*. After her tenure as editor, she became a Congresswoman that fought for equal rights. Fenwick became politically active in the 1930s. During that time, she was also worked as a model. She was the editor of *Vogue* from 1938-1948, during which she wrote *Vogue's Book of Etiquette*.²² *Vogue's Book of Etiquette* gave a particularly insightful ideal of a modern, yet sophisticated woman. The book gives advice on being singleness, motherhood, fashion, and even etiquette for dining at the White House.²³

After leaving *Vogue* to pursue a fulltime political career, Fenwick was interviewed for an profile in the June 1975 edition of *Vogue*. At that time, Fenwick was a Republican Congresswoman for the state of New Jersey. The profile criticized the media's characterization of her after her congressional win. At a healthy and sharp sixty-four years

²¹ David, "Vogue's New World," 24.

²² "Fenwick, Millicent Hammond (1910-1992)," In *From Suffrage to the Senate: America's Political Women: An Encyclopedia of Leaders, Causes, & Issues*, by Suzanne O'Dea (Amenia, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2013), 1.

²³ Millicent Fenwick, *Vogue's Book of Etiquette: A Complete Guide to Traditional Forms and Modern Usage*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948.

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old, she was teased as a “geriatric triumph” after winning her congressional bid.²⁴ The article described Fenwick’s pivotal trip to Vietnam with other members of Congress, and how it changed her perspective of the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam Conflict. Author Jean Stafford wrote that Fenwick “emerged in her true form as a dove; she had the courageous humility to change her tune. When she came back, she was vehemently against our sending another nickel’s worth of arms” toward the Vietnam Conflict.²⁵

A freelance journalist and model for *Vogue*, Gloria Steinem was a cultural figure that normalized the feminist movement through her popularity. According to historian Suzanne O’Dea, “Steinem’s physical appeal provided reassurance to some women that feminists can be attractive and enjoy the company of men, in addition to having power.”²⁶ The July 1964 edition of *Vogue* featured Gloria Steinem on the cover, and featured her written profile of African-American writer James Baldwin. Baldwin spoke to Steinem about writing *Mister Charlie*, a Broadway play about an African American man. Baldwin explained to Steinem that “though the action takes place in a small southern town, it applies to the whole country.”²⁷ The article further explained Baldwin’s upbringing and experience within America during the Civil Rights era. This article reflected how *Vogue* became a platform for political and cultural changes within America.

While remaining a uniquely American publication, *Vogue* started to highlight different cultures and fashions within its pages. Editor Diana Vreeland was incredibly inspired by the diverse cultures of the world,

²⁴ Jean Stafford, “Millicent Fenwick: An Adroit Politician,” *Vogue*, June 1975, <https://archive.vogue.com/article/19750601098/print>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Steinem, Gloria Marie (b. 1934),” In *From Suffrage to the Senate: America’s Political Women: An Encyclopedia of Leaders, Causes, & Issues*, by Suzanne O’Dea (Amenia, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2013), 1.

²⁷ Gloria Steinem, “James Baldwin, An Original: A Sharpened view of him,” *Vogue*, July 1964, <https://archive.vogue.com/article/19640701073/print>.

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which influenced the pages of *Vogue*. For instance, Vreeland featured clothing and models from African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. She personally knew and admired the queen of Thailand, and featured Asian fashion motifs within her editorials. Diana Vreeland drew influence not only from the fashion of other parts of the world, but also from its different religious beliefs. She believed in the importance of meditation, and felt that spiritual articles were useful to “give people a bit of a lift.”²⁸ She used her tenure at *Vogue* to expand *Vogue’s* recognition of diverse cultures.

Vreeland refrained from making political statements during her tenure, and viewed the realm of her work to be outside Academia. When asked about her views by a college student, Vreeland explained that “no war or pestilence in history has ever stopped fashion and manners in dress from progressing and changing... fashion is always guided by the social and economic world as it changes and fluctuates.”²⁹ This perspective showed a simplistic view of what *Vogue* was: a reflection of a changing culture and its fashions. Under her leadership, *Vogue* was not a platform for social change. Rather, it was a platform for the changing fashions within a society. More than anything, *Vogue* promoted an aesthetic.

Diana Vreeland’s tenure as *Vogue* editor corresponds with the age of Old Hollywood. Grace Mirabella, her successor as editor, spoke of the direction of the magazine during Vreeland’s time and stated that “Vreeland changed the content [of *Vogue*]. Fantasy ... in clothes and in beauty- plus the first very well reported plastic surgery articles,” were published under Vreeland’s leadership.³⁰ Thus, according to Mirabella, the focus towards new societal aspects during Vreeland’s generation, such as plastic surgery, showed and reflected the interests of not only the readership, but broader society. The pages of *Vogue* showed a piece of

²⁸ Vreeland, *Diana Vreeland memos: The Vogue Years*, 188-190.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 196.

³⁰ Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 245.

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the real life of America, within an appealing vision of the American Dream.

Vreeland's successor, Grace Mirabella, shared Vreeland's passion for *Vogue*. However, her background was in stark contrast to Vreeland's. Vreeland came from a wealthy background, which is reflected within her leadership at *Vogue*. In her memoir, Mirabella explains that "Vreeland was a pure product of Parisian couture... her tastes were as aristocratic and European as [Mirabella's] were American."³¹ Mirabella explained her original distaste for working with Vreeland because of how out-of-touch Vreeland seemed. "She was someone who, while my family and millions of others were struggling through the Great Depression" had written about importing furniture, writing with diamond pencils, and washing children's hair "in dead champagne."³² The dichotomy of Vreeland and Mirabella reflected the cultural dissonance within *Vogue*: fashion and culture within competing contexts of wealth and attainability.

The transition of leadership provided new energy, which resulted in significant cultural changes within the organization. Grace Mirabella's promotion to editor signaled *Vogue's* transition into modern society. Mirabella shifted focus to "the fashion of real life."³³ She wanted to promote an image that reflected modern culture: an image that was consistent with the magazine's readership. Mirabella's tenure was characterized by bold editorial choices. One of these decisions was the August 1974 cover. Beverly Johnson became the first African-American model on the cover of the magazine. This occurred three years into Mirabella's tenure. The issue was aptly titled "our American look issue."³⁴ The Beverly Johnson cover marked a shift in cultural representation in mainstream media.

³¹ Mirabella, *In and Out of Vogue*, 108.

³² *Ibid*, 104.

³³ *Ibid*, 213.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 212.

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Despite her wealth, Vreeland focused on the economic viability of *Vogue*'s audience. This is reflected within the current publication of *Vogue* under current editor Anna Wintour. While *Vogue* is bent toward high fashion, both editors made it a priority to highlight less expensive clothing. Vreeland wrote, "I think that the most completely constructive thing that *Vogue* can do for its readers is when we show a group of inexpensive clothes for summer."³⁵ Wintour presented clothes from multiple cost brackets, as evinced in her first magazine cover.³⁶

The first *Vogue* cover under Wintour's leadership featured a model wearing jeans, a first for the magazine. The incongruity of "an expensive item [a couture jacket] paired with an inexpensive one [jeans] showed Wintour's risk-taking sensibilities."³⁷ This also reflected a change in what was viewed as fashionable. Wintour's first cover argued that even jeans could fit within the framework elegance and sophistication that magazine evokes. Another one of the editorial changes was a more realistic portrayal of its models. A practical approach to this was seen in a no-makeup shoot with model Claudia Schiffer. Anna Wintour explained "she looked terrific. It was part of showing real girls in real life."³⁸ Furthermore, *Vogue*'s historic focus on culture and those who define it is reflected in the decision to feature prominent social figures, such as Gloria Steinem, within its pages.

The twentieth century marked several significant technological advancements and social changes. As America grew, American consumerism grew with it. American culture, politics, and media developed alongside technological advancements. *Vogue* publication was a lasting part of American media because it adapted to the changing world. *Vogue* created a vision of the American dream, ever changing in

³⁵ Vreeland, *Diana Vreeland memos: The Vogue Years*, 86.

³⁶ Angeletti, *In Vogue: the Illustrated History of the World's Most Famous Fashion Magazine*, 251.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 251.

³⁸ Vreeland, *Diana Vreeland memos: The Vogue Years*, 258.

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its aesthetic, that enchanted the public. This allowed Vogue to maintain a steadily growing readership, primarily of American women. The historic collective publication of Vogue represented changing ideals, and created a helpful lens for interpreting the social values and social change of twentieth century America.